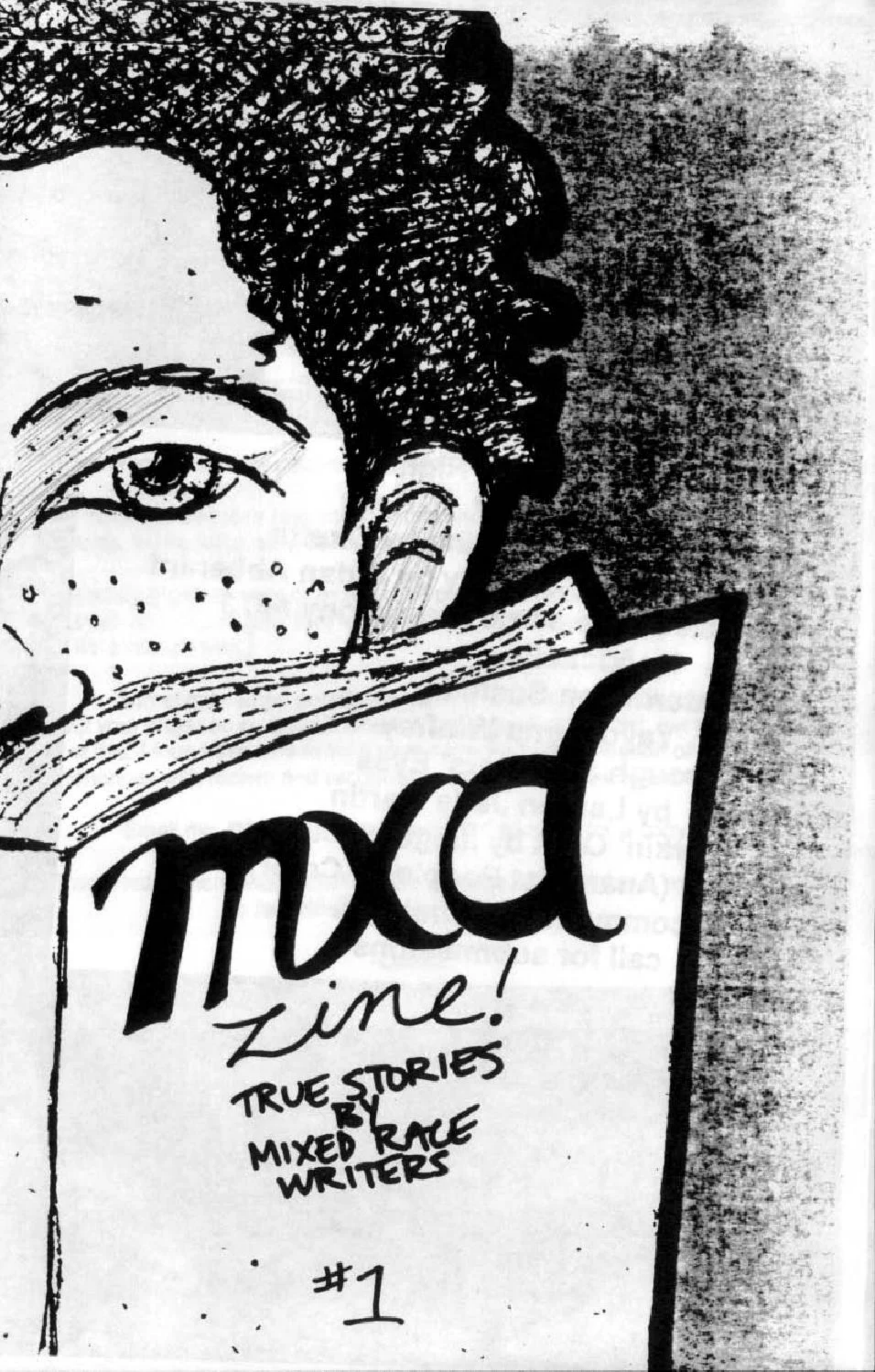
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TRUE STORIES
BY
MIXED RACE
WRITERS
#1

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Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

Not to justify my existence in this world.
Not to keep the races separate within me.
Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.
Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical or ethnic ambiguity.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.
To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.
To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.
To identify myself differently in different situations.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic.
To change my identity over my lifetime--and more than once.
To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.
To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

© Maria P. P. Root, PhD, 1993, 1994

Ethnic, or something

I am light-skinned, Black, white, Middle Eastern and Jewish. I grew up in a predominantly white, Irish and Roman Catholic middle-class town where I knew no other mixed race people except my sister.

I wish my parents raised me around more Black people and culture. Claiming any part of Blackness now feels to me like the cultural appropriation it appears as to others. I feel conspicuously like a suburban white girl among the Black, urban members of my family. Yet, I feel distinctly like the only person of color in a room of whites when they are making racist jokes or being entertained by racist stereotypes.

I want to be part of a more racially diverse community, but I fear that my presence in people-of-color-only spaces will be seen as intrusive. I want to disassociate myself from whiteness and the history of white oppression, but have the privilege of being seen and treated as white and need to be accountable for my own racism. I sometimes question whether my choice not to identify as white provides a convenient escape from having to own up to my privilege and prejudices.

I have to "out" myself to negate the assumption that I am white, and even then my self-identification is sometimes ignored. When I make my heritage known, I am often invalidated with "you don't look Black." Failure to explain my ethnicity to new acquaintances merits remarks like, "I've never seen a white girl with hair like that before. Are you ethnic or something?" The second person who asked this, a customer at the coffee shop where I worked, added, "Or are you one of those people who doesn't like to talk about [your ethnicity]?"

I'm talking about it. I am African-American, Lebanese and Hungarian and the following experiences illustrate just a few of the challenges I face as a light-skinned Black-and-white mixed race person in predominantly white environments:

Before I was born, my maternal grandmother disowned my mother for marrying my father. She only started talking to my mom again, 10 years later, after my grandfather died. Every year to this day, my parents fight about spending Thanksgiving with my mom's family, because my father still, understandably, feels unwelcome and uncomfortable among them.

My father instilled a lot of Black pride in me early on in life. I identified as Black when I was young, but was eventually worn down by people telling me I wasn't. I now identify as mixed race.

My parents emphasized the importance of knowing my history. From a young age I knew that Blacks had been brought to the states in tiny compartments underneath the floors of ships and Jews had been forced into ovens and killed. I began reading slave narratives in elementary school and later inherited my dad's black power book collection. Black men were the subject of every biography project I did in grade school; Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Bill Cosby. I remember crying, reading Jackie Robinson's autobiography in sixth grade, when one of Robinson's teammates starts scratching at his palm frantically trying to get his skin to turn lighter and stay.

In school, my sister and I were given forms on which we had to mark our race. We could only mark one box and "mixed" was not an option. School policy dictated that if we could not decide on one race, an administrator would decide for us.

I spent endless time and money trying to chemically straighten my hair in middle school after my classmates dubbed me "Mufasa" because of my long, recalcitrant curls. I felt alien in both white and Black salons, having far too "unruly" hair for the former and being too "tender-headed" for the latter.

In high school, my PSAT score won me an award for "outstanding participation" in the Black National Merit Scholar Competition. I felt humiliated and guilty when asked to claim the award in front of the whole school, as if I had robbed the real Black students of something they deserved. I had only marked myself as Black and became eligible for the award because there was no mixed race option on the PSAT form. I flushed when students congratulated me on the award, or murmured to themselves as I passed by. Later that day at an activist meeting where I assumed I was among friends, another student demanded, "So is one of your parents Black or something?"

I attended a private art college populated almost entirely by white suburbanites in a city populated predominantly by poor African-Americans. The school endowed incoming freshman with fear of the city and its people to compensate for what it couldn't give them in street smarts. Students were discouraged from venturing off-campus alone and received frequent crime reports about muggings on campus describing the perpetrators only as Black men in hooded sweatshirts. At best it gave their approximate ages. I listened to my roommates describe any Black men from off-campus as "sketchy" and "ghetto" on a regular basis, though they had met my family and knew I was half Black.

In art school, classmates caricatured unflattering stereotypes of people of color in illustration class assignments and went unchallenged. When I tried to bring the offensive images to my white professor's attention, she said she thought they were a "benign" form of racism, once I managed to convince her that it was racist at all.

When I tried to talk to the counselor of color at the office of "multi-ethnic" and international student affairs, she was convinced I had stumbled into the wrong office (because I didn't look like a person of color) and let me know, peering at me skeptically over her glasses and talking over me as I tried to explain my frustration in class.

By the time I went to an administrator to drop the class I had given up trying to convince anyone of the validity of my discomfort and anger, and skirted questions about the details of why I hated art school. Even after I dropped out entirely, I avoided giving the details of the racism I experienced to friends, fearing they would invalidate my feelings with, "that's not racist," like I have been told so many times before.

I sought counseling while in college regarding relationship trouble, but the counselor's fascination with my racial makeup guided all conversations back to my family. She told me, "Pretty soon everyone will be mixed race. Things are going to get easier for people like you."

I've gotten so used to feeling "over-sensitive" to racism that I am only now starting to understand that the problem is actually the insensitivity and obliviousness of people of the around me, not that I possess some overly well-honed racism-detection skills. Recently, for the first time, I met a number of mixed race folks who have the context to understand where I'm coming from and don't require me to explain and justify my emotional responses to racism. Finding such a community fuelled the surge of mixed race pride which inspired this essay.

Oxette is a young, queer feminist zinester, drummer, artist and activist from the Boston area. She loves indie comics, vegan food, gypsy punk, 4square, and autobiographies by revolutionary women of color.

"My Calling Card" by Adrian Piper; mixed race conceptual artist

Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

A VANDAL'S QUANDARY

Keith Rosson, in his zine "AVOW," once wrote: "Sometimes all you can be is an excellent bad example."

In the dead of night, two years ago, I put on my hoodie and grabbed a black ski-mask from my closet. I walked across town, jumping a fence and stealing a brick from a construction site; Overpriced condos. I walked up to that house on the Hill, next to the police station, with the Confederate Flag hanging in the window, ducking behind the fence and pulling the ski mask over my face. The street was completely quiet and the house was dark. Gripping the brick I made ready to chuck it at the window. One step back for a good overhand throw...

I stopped myself: This was no different than National Front skins tossing bricks through the windows of Pakistani immigrants 'round London when I was a kid. It's just what these guys may have been provoking; an act of ideological vandalism (after the manipulations of a strike-force of lawyers) becomes a reactionary assault on their "freedom of speech" privileges by a deranged individual and in the court of public opinion, I wouldn't stand a chance.

I threw the brick onto the lawn and walked away. Taking my ski mask and gloves off and deciding to kick an empty bottle half way down the street instead, defeated by my better judgement.

I strongly agree with [former SPIN columnist] Chuck Klosterman when he wrote, "American culture is nothing more than a pastiche of fixations." I've been seeing these displays of _____ (A) Cultural Ignorance (B) cultural Insensitivity (C) Abject Stupidity (D) Backasswards Hatred more often than I would like around here- I've seen people flying the "stars 'n bars" from their cars or using them as cell phone covers. I guess the current pastiche fixates on wishful thinking; Hoping the history behind a controversial symbol will just go away so it can become hip, fashionable, and postmodern. Sid Vicious once wore a swastika t-shirt while walking down the Jewish quarter in Paris. Our corporations may not be manufacturing swastika t-shirts to be sold in malls to angst-ridden, postmodern 16 years old boys, but they don't seem to have qualms about offering "star's n' bars" decorated cell phone covers for sale (footnote 1) to young kids who likely aren't being educated in its controversy.

I'm astonished and bewildered that it bothers me so much. I may be black-identified (footnote 2), but I'm not American: I'm British. By conventional logic I shouldn't have an ideological stake in Southern good 'ol boy iconography. But culture is a complex thing, especially in a postmodern era where even irony has been colonized.

Why are symbols so powerful? Is it the symbols themselves that stir up emotion and memoury? Or do we give power to the symbols? Ideologies are partly learned from the environments we live in. I may not have grown up in a culture that reviled the Confederate flag, but living in an environment where it can be flaunted despite its ugly history (footnote 3) may have had the same effects. Someone in my position has to ask the question "with everything we know about the stars 'n bars, its usage, and what it symbolizes to certain people, is there any justifiable reason to plead ignorance when flying one?"

> I guess in [American] non-analytical culture (footnote 4) everything can be taken out of context; everything is ironic and everything is subjective in this culture. The solipsism (footnote 5) of white America is part of how I think the guys or guy who chose to display the flag might have justified it: "Oh it's just a southern pride thing to me, it doesn't have anything to do with hating black people," He/they might have said.

But it has a history of being flaunted by people who do hate black people (among others)... How can you justify taking the risk of being read as identifying with and supporting that daft, nationalist, bullshit?

> You might end up with a brick through your window.

The simple answer here is privilege. It must be easy to dismiss the ideological reactions of others when you come from that segment of the culture that has the power to dictate the meaning of symbols.

I often tell this story about nearly putting a brick through that window to people who ask me why in HELL I thought it was a good idea to move to the city. I want to tell them that I moved to the city to level the playing field; get away from all the bourgeois white-privilege but I usually just end up saying that I wasn't a good farmer.No one thinks it's funny. "American'ts" just stare at me with eyes like saucers. The stud belted, skinny-jeaned, pierced, Buddy Holly eyeglass wearing, pin bagged [black]Punk/[black]INDIE/[...black] rocker, self-indentified-Black-identified Leftist-Marxist-Anarchist no one can make head nor tale of.

> I may have had a point when I nearly put a brick through that window but any relevance that act might have had would have been voted out by the culture of relativism; where nothing matters. There can be no universal consensus that anything that hurts others, no matter how small the minority affected, eventually affects the majority.

No matter how crass, cutthroat, and impotent my display that night at least it was some last dog-breath gasp of meaning before the culture of the empty gesture engulfed all.

FOOTNOTES

(footnote 1) I began seeing these by the dozens around the release of the Dukes of Hazzard remake which makes this even more fucked.

(fogtnote 2) I use the term "black-identified" here because in America "black" is a loaded term which implies cultural baggage that I don't experience in other places. I also feel that in America for me to self-identify as "black" negates the European and Persian parts of my heritage.

(footnote 3) You could argue that any national flag is going to be looked at with disdain by someone. Are some national flags worse than others? Well, that's a matter of perspective.

(footnote 4) By non-analytical I mean anti-analysis, anti thought. Everyday life is taken for granted and the majority of Americans rely on the guidance of "experts" with "facts," which are social-constructs, laden with values and ideologies. The ideologies never go questioned, and the "facts" are considered to be airtight. No one bothers to ask who invented a particular "fact." Why it was invented or where it came from.

(footnote 5) the theory that only the self exists or can be proven to exist.

--Aidan Aberrant is a varied artist in the Denver art scene; primarily a filmmaker and cinematographer he works with a varitey of mixed-media from celluloid, to painting, to written word. He runs a mini-film festival, MONTAGE, is a freelance projectionist and owns a Bolex. He lives in a tiny Denver house with three fish, and a dog Named Aslan. A Denver Zinester, he pens and pencils the indie comics "Stungun," and "rêves méchants: espoirs méchants" and writes the zine "ATAXIA." "ATAXIA" as well as his upcoming zines, "parallelism," and "countdown to Manhood" will be available at Stranger Danger Distro later in '07. Contact Aidan at:Aidan.Aberrant@gmail.com

mixed-race person testimony #573 (cuz it's that easy, right?!)
by Michelle

when i pushed out of my mother's womb, the devil stabbed me so hard
so hard...
that i began to cry
they say the devil does this to introduce pain to all of god's children
but the devil did more that day
with his jagged dagger he removed a part of me that the color of my skin could barely hold on to
years passed and i was none the wiser
happily smiling in my white-washed world i grew
grew into a girl who craved blonde hair, blue eyes, and to be "pretty"
but i was just a wolf in sheep's clothing
the problem being that my ears were sticking out, and i couldn't get the damn zipper down
and there i was, and here i remain
stuck
in between two worlds
what's a girl to do?
so i sucked it up and breathed out my last bit of dignity and got my white voice on and worked twice as hard as all of those perfect little white kids to prove that i was worth a damn...
at least, that's how my daddy showed me how to do it
i was, and am, a white man's token
and a brown man's joke
a huerita,
a gringa that didn't know la raza or mexico,
but brown enough to count
but i'm learning
i'm mending my scars
and i have hope
cuz i know now
that with my skin, my blood, and my memories,

i'm truly whole

and one day i'll have children and i'll thank the heavens above
that they aren't wishing away for blond hair or a zipper that works
i'm pissed at what was taken from me, that's for sure
but i can't blame my family
they only thought they were bettering our lives
they thought with english and not spanish
with white and not brown,
our lives would really be ok
no, i blame those white faces, those blond hairs, and those blue eyes
cuz it was a white man's mouth that whispered into a brown ear,
"with english and not spanish,
with white and not brown
you will really be ok"

as i was sitting down to write a little addition to a poem i had written a year or two ago, i began at this intensely broad level of trying to feel out my entire experience as a mixed-race person and how i could possibly relate that in a few pages of writing. suffice it to say, there is no way to do that. there may not even be enough pages and time to really relay my experience to others...ever. my skin color and family and culture are things that interact with me on every level – from the most basic to the more intense. how i relate to every experience i've ever had is because of values i was raised with, because of who i was raised with and, most obviously, what color i carry on my arm. while i can't expect or be expected to recount everything in this piece, i hope what i have decided to put down is something other people can relate to, because, at least with my experience, being a mixed-race person can be a very alienating and lonely place.

with that being said, let me introduce myself: i am michelle, and i identify as latina, but also as a mixed-race person. my mom is white and my dad is mexican. maybe it seems a weird discrepancy to identify as both latina and a mixed-race person? but maybe that is a good place to start talking about my experience...because i do not fit into one experience or the other. for instance, i can't just be white because of my skin...that's really the only qualification that matters there...but i can't really be mexican either because of different aspects i have been told about – i talk rather "white," i learned spanish in school and not in the home, i didn't celebrate my 15th birthday with a quinceanera, etc.

it's heartbreaking, really, when a 5 year old girl has to wish for blonde hair and blue eyes to feel like she fits in...and it's equally as tragic when this same girl begins to accept her skin color and her "unique" family only to be turned away again by another culture that she is supposed to so deeply embrace. now, i'm not saying every white person or every person of mexican descent i've ever encountered has vehemently turned their backs on me – that is not the case. i can relate to a multitude of people, but only up until a point. even though i don't benefit from white privilege in the same way others do, somehow my experience of being a person of color is diminished or "dumbed down" because i'm not "dark enough". it's a battle that my family has seen for a long time, a battle that continues on today. my grandparents moved here as young children – to a tiny little shit-hole town in kansas – where they would eventually meet and start a family. they were not allowed to do things as basic and simplistic as going swimming at the ymca, or eating at the local mcdonald's, not to mention other forms of constant ridicule and oppression because of the color of their skin, because of the language they spoke, because of the food they liked to eat, etc., etc. my grandparents decided the best way to handle this was to turn their backs on their culture – starting with their language. my dad, who started his life speaking spanish, was since forbidden to do so and can barely understand it now. despite continuing to speak spanish amongst themselves, my grandparents have not uttered more than a spattering of "hola" and "nietos" when around us, even now that some of us are fluent in the language.

the culture of my family was very quickly white-washed in a very purposeful and internalized way. i visited my grandparents

this last summer and tried to speak with them about current immigration issues and about our own family. it was very discouraging to hear them echo the (internalized) racist comments i've heard from so many people i've written off as "shit-bags." but also hard knowing how their opinions on the matter have been shaped by society at large. i can't blame them totally...from knowing what i know about their own situation and how i see that repeating in the lives of many today, there is this sense of desperation – to assimilate or get the fuck out - because who isn't told they want to (they must) achieve the american dream, right? while i understand the choice of my grandparents and understand the choice many have and are still making – that choice is not for me. unfortunately or fortunately, i have the privilege to deny that choice, and cannot allow myself to try and fit into one particular "box" anymore, especially a box i keep being told i will never be a part of. my skin is beautiful, my family is beautiful and my blood is thick and strong; none of these things will change. i am michelle and i am many things, all of which are amazing in their own way, and it is no one's right to tell me where i belong. i have spent much time trying to figure that out, and i still don't totally fit in every where i go. in my community there are some that more totally know about where i'm coming from - i'm even blessed/lucky enough to be living with one person who shares this experience with me – but not everyone, and i'm glad about that. if everyone i was around understood totally, that would be some sort of dump on who i am because not everyone shares this experience with me. it would be like belittling my experience of being a mixed-race person to expect that non-mixed persons would be able to really empathize. non-mixed people can "get it" and see how life might be like in my shoes, but it is other mixed-race people that have a better understanding. shit, they knew from the moment they began reading this.
-michelle

---

my name is michelle...i currently reside in denver, but grew up in kansas. aside from being into being brown, i play in two bands,

tend the herbs in my backyard, and don't have no time for no b.s. i also feel weird just talking about myself like i'm writing for a dating website or something, but if you want feel free to hit me up at tedestruire@gmail.com

mi sangre
mi agua

Watermelon Sushi

By Yayoi Lena Winfrey

"Nig-grrrr!"

The word struck me hard, like a violent slap across the face. Peeking carefully from beneath hooded eyelids, I frantically searched for the location of its origin before that word could catch me off guard again.

As my younger sister and I continued our perfunctory walk down the street in front of our new home, I glanced towards a neighbor's flowering front yard where a 50ish white man stood quietly watering his garden. Standing erect, his pink bald-head made pinker by the orange rays of the afternoon sun, he glared at us until my sister and I looked away in wounded confusion.

I was 11 and she was 8, when we were called the "n" word for the first time. Sadly, it wouldn't be our last. But like a lot of first time detrimental experiences, that afternoon lingers in my mind like a bad dream long after I've awakened as to its reason.

In 1961, my parents purchased our first "civilian" house in what had previously been an all-white neighborhood--four years before the Civil Rights Voting Act became law. That we weren't attacked with burning crosses impaled in our tidy front lawn in Tacoma, a bedroom suburb thirty miles south of Seattle, was a miracle.

Although our Japanese mother and African American father were two different colors, up until the time we were thrust into Tacoma's monoracial white society, my sister and I scarcely gave thought to our biracial heritage. We'd known plenty of kids before just like us. Because of my dad's Army career, our family lived on military bases in Germany and Washington State following my birth in Tokyo and my sister's in Texas. In post-war Japan, I lived with my mother and her relatives. In Texas, we stayed near my dad's family in a legally segregated neighborhood. But once we were stationed in Germany, we befriended many children of interracial couples. During the period following World War II, it wasn't uncommon to see Japanese and German women married to Black or Caucasian American soldiers.

By the time we moved to Ft. Lewis, our neighbors included Puerto Ricans because of the Commonwealth, Filipinos who joined the U.S. armed services, Mexican Americans and Native Americans. My best friend Sondra was a Puerto Rican with straight sandy hair and my sister's best friend, Tessie, was a Filipina with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Other pals included Rosemarie whose German mother married a Caucasian American, Esther whose German mother married a Black American and Lola whose Japanese mother married a Caucasian American. Then, there were the five Monroe girls and the three Diggs' children whose mother, like ours, was Japanese and whose father, also like ours, was Black. Like our family, the Diggs and Monroes ate sushi for dinner along with pork chops, grits, greens and gravy. Nobody thought it was weird. Instead, we were constantly learning languages, customs, religions, folktales and superstitions from each other. Being a military dependent at that time was like living at the U.N.–a culturally enriching experience.

By the time I reached puberty, my parents had saved enough to buy a three-bedroom rambler in Tacoma three houses away from the elementary school I attended for a year–the only bronze face in sea of white save for a single boy who looked Native American, but understandably identified white.

Most people then, as they do now, assumed I was Polynesian, but until I moved to Hawai'i in 1994 I knew very little about Pacific Island cultures. As an adolescent, I just wanted to fit in, but my thick, wavy black hair and golden skin made that impossible.

My teen years were the most miserable in my life simply because I could not forge an identity within my environment. Media constantly sent messages that blue-eyed blondes were to be coveted in America. In the 1960's, there were no magazines spinning images of beautiful Asian women nor were there any sistah girls all crown-rowed and sassy gorgeous to be found on the newsstands. Until Soul Train was broadcast in the early 1970's, I never saw anything on TV that made me feel pretty let alone acceptable to this society. Every single Miss America was white. Every single Miss Universe had blonde hair–even those from South Africa and Brazil.

Where I used to excel academically, I became shy and retiring. I hated speaking in front of other children. I felt they were dissecting my features and wondering why I didn't look white like them. Sometimes someone would say something crude and I'd freeze wishing that I could disappear into thin air.

"Oh, your hair is so coarse," one schoolmate told me rudely and I knew she meant there was something wrong with me.

Entering junior high, I grew even quieter hoping that if I appeared unobtrusive enough no one would notice that I was different.

"Your mom talks funny. I can't understand her," kids complained whenever they came to my house and my mother was there.

I stopped bringing them over whenever she was home.

is that your dad?" they'd exclaim before holding a long deep silence that made me feel as if I'd betrayed them by not revealing my Negro roots earlier.

I made sure my dad was gone the next time they stopped by.

Besides the ugly experiences I encountered with my peers, I also had the added burden of having parents who were of no help in the matter. My mother, an immigrant who escaped an impoverished childhood and the horrors of war, was only too happy to have a home of her own where she could lavish materially on my sister and me with music and ice-skating lessons. Because she struggled with English, we couldn't communicate our suffering to her. Oblivious to our pain, my mom fed us home made delicacies like okonomiyaki, fresh miso and inarizushi as well as cultural tidbits by reading us the manga comics that came once a month from Japan. She never once told us we were biracial.

As for my father, he was never at home. Whenever he wasn't pulling duty at another Army base overseas, he'd be out in the field for long periods of time. And when he was around, he was disagreeable and tyrannical. As I got older, I realized that it was his oppression as a southern black man in a newly integrated military that made him so mean to us--his family.

Just as my dark days grew darker, I found that proverbial light in the tunnel. I stumbled upon the Black Nationalist Movement. While my sister turned me on to books like Earl Shorris' Ofay and John A. Williams' The Man Who Cried I Am, I discovered Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, Angela Davis and Malcolm X in the pages of Rampart's and IF Stone's Weekly. It was like surfacing for air after being forced underwater for so long. I began to learn about my ancestors; who they were, how they got here and the hardships they endured. I learned a new word. Diaspora.

Although my mom taught us Japanese history through her rambling narratives about the Emperor and the ancient ruling samurai class, my dad never talked to us about the ugly legacy of slavery. Thanks to my mother, I could rattle off facts and figures about imperialist Japan, but I never knew any Asian Americans. The only Asians I encountered were my mother's immigrant girlfriends and their stories were of Japan, not about being Asians in America. There was the nissei man who owned the Fuji 10 Cents Store a few blocks away where we rode our bikes to buy candy, but he was never friendly and my mother said it was because he didn't like women like her marrying men like my father.

I could write tomes about my early struggle for identity, but I do think pictures speak louder than words. That's why in 1997 I penned a screenplay, Watermelon Sushi, depicting an Afro-Asian family with its central character experiencing an identity crisis. Unfortunately, I shot the film on my credit cards and was forced to shut down production when my producer ripped me off to the tune of several thousand dollars. Although the film remains unfinished today, I'm hopeful we'll find an executive producer to begin pre-production this year. Meanwhile, peep this: http://www.watermelonsushi.com

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Through Strangers' Eyes

by **Lauren Martin**

Reprinted from Quantify #5

My style, my presentation, is wholly inconsistent, changing day to day, even hour to hour, and the reaction I get from people alternately ranges from smiles and whistles to glares and nasty comments. The "safe" Lauren: looks female, Asian or white, light-skinned, is small, quiet, non-threatening, speaks English. The "dangerous" Lauren: is ambiguously gendered, a person of color (race unknown), doesn't smile, looks like a big ol' dyke, looks like a flaming fag, talks loud when she gets excited. Which Lauren has more privilege, which gets harassed more, which worries more about getting her ass kicked, which gets taken less seriously, which gets interviewed for jobs, which gets the job? Impossible to answer, because strangers will simultaneously read me in both (or other) ways, some picking up on cues or codes (how is my hair styled, what am I wearing, what neighborhood am I in, who am I with?), others making assumptions based on stereotypes, all of them making inferences about my gender, race, class and sexuality.

The answer to "What are you?" (in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and a host of other queries) is not so simple, so easy. Nine years ago, six years ago, three years ago, the answers sometimes terrified me, sometimes confused me, sometimes kept me up at night scribbling in my journal. But, as I've stated in other places, I am no longer in identity-crisis mode. (And just because the crisis is over, that does not necessarily mean that the process of naming is complete). I have reconciled the fact that my identity does not have to be consistent, and that it will probably never match up with people's preconceived notions as long as they are operating under a binary belief system. That is, it all started with race and my knowledge from an early age that the black/white dichotomy left no room for me, that my existence as a mixed-race Asian/Jewish person queers and totally fucks with that dichotomy. Throw in some queer and gender theory (i.e. break down those old-fashioned illusions of homosexuality versus heterosexuality, of male versus female) and everything just becomes so postmodern you can barely even handle it.

This Lauren is integrated, but she still likes to collect nicknames and alter-egos for herself. She has always had secret lives and competing personas-not just imaginary friends but imaginary identities. I grew up with the mythologies of Super Heroes and after-school cartoons, content with the knowledge that with the utterance of a few magic words, or the donning of a cape, or the alignment of the moon and stars, the body could be magically transformed, a new person could emerge, with super powers, even. These were not brand-new mythologies, of course, but rather updated versions of the changeling, the coyote trickster, Greek immortals made manifest in She-Ra, Voltron, Teen Wolf, the whole Marvel Comics crew, even bumbling Inspector Gadget always had a bag of tricks up his sleeve. The lesson I learned from these mythologies was that what you see is not always what you get, or, as the digitized theme song from *Transformers* went: *"More than meets the eye."* These beings were not either/or, Clark Kent was Superman, Autobots were both robots and automobiles at the same time. In that vein, in real life I, too, could be more than meets the eye. Not "just" Lauren, but many Laurens, different versions of who I am, not competing with one another, but all of them calmly resting inside. Chinese and Jewish, and that's not a contradiction (although even I can recognize it as one hella pomo racial i.d.), neither is having queer gender/s and sexuality/ies necessarily cause for a conflict.

All the Laurens get harassed, in every way that people read me: as girl (cute), as boy (probably gay), as dyke (all I need is a good...), as Asian (here come the fetishists), as genderqueer (what the fuck is that?), as racially ambiguous (certainly not white, or at least not WASP). And, quite often, these perceptions get mixed and matched.

Case Study Number One: I am walking with a white friend at night in Manhattan. We are both read as female and are surrounded by a group of teenage boys who proceed to harass us. Initially, their gendered comments are directed at both me and Danny, but then the harassment becomes racialized (racist) and I am clearly the one being targeted. We both make our way through the crowd of boys, but when I have finally pushed my way through I am dizzy, I feel lost, I don't see my friend anywhere. A second or two later, I see my friend a couple paces away. Danny had emerged from the throng just a few steps ahead of me. I say nothing about what just happened, I pick up our conversation where we had left off, and Danny, following my cue, says nothing about it either.

But I don't want for us only to think about power and privilege in terms of individual acts such as street harassment. Let's think about institutional power, and how that plays out among the individual acts of a person or persons representative of institutional authority. I want to complicate our ideas about passing and how that relates to (individual) privilege and (institutional) power. For example, passing in one particular subset of identity (e.g. gender) is, obviously, mediated through other subsets (e.g. race, class, ability, citizenship).

Case Study Number Two: I am on my way to a conference in Ohio. It is the first time I've flown since September 11, 2001. I get "randomly" searched at the first security checkpoint. "Sir, will you take off your shoes please?" the security guard asks me. Waiting to board, I write in my journal: "So far they searched my backpack and my boots. The security guy called me 'sir'-I wonder what effect that has on profiling-if I am seen as a man of color and thus a potential threat? What if a male security guard starts to pat me down, thinking I'm a dude? Well then I'd speak up and they'd apologize and have a woman do it, but what about trans people? How are these increased security measures (important and all, of course) affecting trans people, gender ambiguous people, racially ambiguous people, and POCs in general?"

Before boarding the plane, I get "randomly" picked to be searched again. Off come the boots. This time the guards i.d. me as female, and I get assigned a female guard for the pat-down.

I've been obsessed with fragmentation since forever. I'm still fascinated by the idea that these truths we hold to be self-evident are not in fact static, but are tentative and subject to rupture. For those of us who may appear racially-, sexually-, and/or gender-ambiguous, there is often a *juncture*, a split between how we are treated before someone knows who we "really" are versus how we are treated after.

Case Study Number Three: I am at the queer women's Institute of a national domestic violence conference. One woman crosses the room and approaches the person seated right next to me. The person next to me has a common Jewish first name-Ari-and, I guess, common Jewish features. The woman who crossed the room starts a conversation with Ari, and invites her to be a part of some radical Jewish get-together. I sit there, calmly twiddling my thumbs, as I am ignored. Moments later, the Institute engages in a "Crossing the Room" exercise. The facilitator announces some identity, and those who identify cross the room. Then everyone else crosses the room to join them. "If you are a Jewish woman, cross the room," the facilitator says. I am one of the first persons to cross, and I wonder how many Institute attendees I have surprised by doing so. Later, at lunch, I am seated with the woman who had approached Ari. "You should come to the next Radical Jews dinner," she invites me. How can I express to her that her prior behavior has already made clear to me that I really would not feel welcome there?

No one can ever "tell" that I am ethnically half-Jewish, therefore I continually have to "come out" as a Jew to people. What this means is that not only do I not get invited to take part in activities with other Jews, but it also means that I am very often subject to people making anti-Semitic remarks in my presence. Would they make these same comments in front of me if they knew that my dad and grandmother are Holocaust survivors? Furthermore, does the fact that I don't "look" Jewish make it easier for people to conveniently "forget" that I am? Those of us who are not easily identified as Other are privy to information that is not readily available to those who cannot-or do not-pass. That is, we are witnesses to what "you" really think of us, whether we want to hear it or not. Harlem Renaissance writer Walter White, for example, used his white skin as a ticket to unearth details about lynchings and other white supremacist activities. And light-skinned Black conceptual artist/philosopher Adrian Piper has printed special "business cards," one to inform those who make racist remarks in her presence that they have just offended her, and another set to hand out to people who sexually harass her. In this very clever manner (which has since been endlessly copied by others) Piper addresses both overt and covert bigotry and oppression that she experiences at the hands of strangers.

Let's go back to that rupture, back to the before & after. If you know me in one way, will it be difficult for you to view me in another? Even if we both have come to the realization that the personas we have presented to each other are a mix of both conscious and sub-conscious construction? People who know me well, who know me as *Lauren*, who know me as girl, who know me as hapa, sometimes do not believe me when I tell them that I often pass as other than these things. "You could never pass as a guy, you're such a girl!" they say, or "You totally look Asian, I can't see you as anything else," or "I can't believe you pass," or "Really? I don't believe it." I don't think it is always so much that my friends, coworkers, family members, etc. are trying to invalidate my experiences; rather, they see me as they know me, as they have grown to know me, as the specific person I have constructed for them, and it is difficult for them to see me through strangers' eyes.

How I appear through strangers' eyes terrifies and enrages me at the same time it daringly piques my curiosity. I hate the idea of being boxed in by petty assumptions, and I fear the violent reactions of bigoted assholes, and yet I am fascinated by what exactly people "see" when they look at me, when they hear me speak, when they catch a glance of me crossing the subway platform or strolling down the street. Furthermore, how does this match up with how I perceive myself? And how much of how I perceive myself is filtered through how other people see me? Again, I do not conceive of this as an identity crisis, but more like an experiment or a study. When I was nineteen I felt like a freak, like an alien from a forbidden planet. And, well, I do still feel like a freak sometimes, but now I can revel in it, find comfort in it, and know that there are lots of other freaks out there who've got my back. (Like my friend Brian, who is also queer and also hapa. He has been living abroad for a couple years now, but recently he was in town for just one night and we had tea with another mutual friend. Brian tells us how people react to him in France, how strangers continually think he's not only Spanish or Latin American, but also read him as female. "Gracias, senorita," they say to him. But sometimes the reaction is not so mild. Sometimes it results in harassment, staring, being followed and attacked. "Oh Brian," I want to say to him, "I forgot how much we understood each other." I give him the nod that I hope says I have been there too.)

There is a visceral *something* that Brian and I share, a reaction that we often unintentionally induce in others. Judith Butler used the phrase "anxiety-ridden spectacle" when I saw her speak on a panel at NYU entitled "Who Owns Gender?" That phrase is the only thing I wrote down in my notebook through the entire evening; perhaps that is why it has stayed with me for so long. What compelled me to write it down in the first place, however, still sticks. The phrase really resonated with me, it seemed to perfectly sum up ideas I've had about ambiguity, about those of us whose lives fall in between the lines, and who are then subjected to outsiders' invasive curiosity and outright violence. With earlier zines such as *Forbidden Planet* (1996), and terms such as "an interstitial existence" (*Quantify* #1, 2000) and "living your life as an enigma" (*Parallel Lines*, 2001), I have previously focused much on internal battles, and what I appreciate about Butler's phrase is the attention it pays to how it can play out externally.

Not that I am constantly being turned into a spectacle, nor am I always invoking anxiety wherever I make an appearance. Everyone who walks around, goes about their business, and interacts with strangers may be subjected to being scrutinized or given the once over. What I am concerned with, however, is how *some of us are more vulnerable than others*, and how I become more or less vulnerable depending on just how strangers interpret "what" I am. And strangers, of course, are not just random people I pass by on the street. They are police officers, potential employers, landlords, doctors, grad school admissions officers, i.e. institutions and people with institutional power. How these people and institutions recognize me can have severe implications and consequences that affect my very well-being and livelihood. And the daily reactions that I do get from those random strangers on the street are also reflective of institutions of privilege, of differences in power, of differences in perception and understanding (which is a standard feminist argument against street harassment, that it is just one rung holding up the continuum of violence and, uh, patriarchy. There-I said it, I said the p-word!). So, how strangers interpret me can mean the difference between being harassed or not, being racially-profiled or not, being invited to join an organization or not, and lots of other circumstances.

Case Study Number Four: Two men are standing on the corner outside my bank. One of them is preaching in Spanish, the other is passing out literature. The man handing out literature sees me coming. He holds out a flyer written in Chinese. "Chinese?" he asks me expectantly, and I shake my head because I can't read what's written on his flyer and besides, I don't want any religious tracts today. He looks at me again, rifles through his packets and holds out another flyer. "¿Hablas español?" I could respond, "Sí, un poquito, pero no lo quiero," but instead I smile and shake my head and keep on walking.

These situations are reenacted over and over again, and are often manufactured on and contingent upon the basis of appearance. There are some other factors, such as one's speaking voice or the context of one's surroundings or companionship, but mostly I'm talking about the *spectacle* here, the fact that people can look at me and have multiple and competing interpretations.

Depending on who you see at this precise moment, I can be the safe Lauren, the dangerous Lauren, or some combination of the two. Not to completely erase my own agency, however, for I am allowed some measure of control, and sometimes I will deliberately try to confuse people, I will mix-and-match pieces of my identity, I will wear layers of outlandish clothing, I will embark upon a serious project of gender- and race-fuck, I will keep secrets to myself and play along.

Case Study Number Five: My brother and I are at the aikido dojo, waiting to watch our dad test for his black belt. One of his coworkers, also there to watch my dad test, comes over to us. "Are you Andy's sons?" he asks me and Ez, stretching out his hand. I hear Ez chuckling beside me. Later, when Ez is recounting the story, my dad asks me, "What did you say?" "I didn't say anything," I tell him. "I just smiled and shook his hand."

Who *was* that masked super-hero, anyway? Maybe I know, but I'm not telling. She is more than meets the eye.

Lauren Jade Martin is a writer, artist, student, and educator who has been active for the past decade in anti-violence and social justice organizing. Lauren has been creating zines for over a decade, and has been published in a number of anthologies and zine compilations including *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution* (St. Martin's Press), *Zine Scene* (Girl Press), *Evolution of a Race Riot*, *How to Stage a Coup*, and *Letters from the War Years*. Her own titles include the sassy compilation *Hard As Nails: the tough girl comp zine*, *Quantify*, and *Art Missive*. She is also a co-founder of the NYC Arts & Crafts Skillshare Collective.

excerpts from

WORKIN' ON it

4ways to tokENizE/aliENatE a NON-WHITE pERSON-

FORUM dispatches FROM illEGalvoicES.ORG

- [Feel entitled to] ask "where are you from?" or "what is your ethnicity?" whenever confronted with a person whose ethnicity you are unsure about.

- Preface the infamous "what are you?" question with a compliment, for instance "you're so beautiful, what are you?" [Fetishizing as you interrogate, two for one!]

- If someone answers the "what are you" question with more than one race, exclaim "no way! That's SO cool" or "What a magical mix." If you're really into it, drop the word "exotic" in there somewhere.

- Check to see if the coast is clear before making racial jokes or comments.

- Assume that light-skinned people around you are white without ever knowing their ancestry.

- Assume you can make openly racist statements around your light-skinned, Asian or mixed friends like, "oh my god, I'm so good at talking to Black people," or "have you noticed that I dance like a Black person?" or "I LOVE Black people."

- Refuse a light-skinned person of color to consider themselves a person of color [by telling them to their face they are whatever race you have decided for them] because you feel safer talking/working with them if they are white. Bring up their POC identity when it serves you.

- Refer to Black people's hair as "ethnic hair" and when in awe of natural Black hairdos, start touching the Black person's hair and tell them that "all Black people should go natural" or ask "how does your hair grow like that?"

- Consider "ethnic" a term that refers exclusively to people of color.

- Tell a racially mixed Black person "you don't act [or look] Black."

- Talk about multi-racial babies like, "oh my God, if we had babies they would be SO cute," or "I'm so jealous, you are going to have the most

adorable children," or "Black babies are just cuter than white babies, everyone knows that."

- Refer to mixed race people as "mutts", like dogs.

Yes, these are people's real experiences and they are not just isolated incidents. White folks, stop asking so surprised.

- [Tell a person of color or mixed race person of color that you don't see them as POC/as how they identify/ or that you see them as white, like it's a compliment.]

Sometimes when people say and do these kind of things it's hard to put your finger on or explain exactly how and why it's racist, but you know it is. I found this zine to be a useful tool for both validation of my own experiences with racism and recognizing my own oppressive behavior.

Email me at Tillthebassdrumpops@riseup.net for a copy.

[Bracketed content was added by me, and I paraphrased and condensed a few other things not in brackets.]

-Oxette

Recommended reading and other resources/Things you might read and be vindicated:

Half and Half by Claudine C. O'Hearn
an excellent anthology of non-fiction personal stories by a diverse group of mixed race and bi-cultural writers
Love's Revolution by Maria P.P. Root
one psychologist's findings based on years of interviews of interracial couples
Mixed by Chandra Prasad
fiction anthology of writing by mixed race writers
American Born Chinese by Gene Yang (Graphic Novel)
story of a Chinese American boy growing up in a white US suburb (highly recommended)
Angry Black White Boy by Adam Mansbach
an analytical novel about cultural appropriation, specifically one white boy his love of hip-hop
Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism
what it sounds like, a bad-ass anthology
La Frontera/Borderlands by Gloria Anzaldua
on what it means to be mestiza (indigenous, Latina and white), lesbian and feminist
Coal to Cream by Eugene Robinson
a black American ex-patriate journalist on variations between how race is constructed the US and different parts of South America
Black, White and Jewish by Rebecca Walker
a coming-of-age memoir on race, family, politics and living between two different worlds
Women, Race and Class by Angela Davis
what your white history books forgot
Workin' on It zine by Anarchist People of Color (illegalvoices.org)
an extensive list of some of the tokenizing and alienating things said to people of color
RentaNegro.com - go see for yourself
From Here to There and Back Again by Shannon Perez-Darby (zine)
on being mixed race, Latina, queer, fat and femme
(available at strangerdangerdistro.com)

Mixed race and bicultural folks,

Did you not feel represented or relate to the stores in this zine? Then please submit for the next issue! Send your non-fiction, personal stories (no poetry please) under 4,000 words in .rtf format to Tillthebassdrumpops@riseup.net any time between now and December 1st, 2007. Thanks!